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Crucifixion of Jesus – Historical Fact, Christian Faith and Islamic Denial

There is no scientific reason to question the existence of Jesus as an authentic historical figure. It means that all the scholars who acknowledge the historicity of Jesus at least as a Jewish teacher and healer accept the fact of his death on the cross.¹ The reasons and the details of the crucifixion given by commentators of the historical sources vary. One thing remains invariable: Jesus was sentenced to death and crucified in Jerusalem on the order of the Roman Prefect of Judaea, Pontius Pilate, most probably on the charge of incitement to rebellion against the Roman Empire.²

There are two groups of scriptures and historical sources which corroborate the historical fact of Jesus' crucifixion. The first group embraces the earliest authentic epistles of Paul, the Christian tradition represented by the Gospels, and the remaining scriptures of the New Testament. The second group forms the Greco-Roman sources, composed in the 1st or mainly during the 2nd century C.E.³

¹ E.g., J. D. Crossan, *The Historical Jesus. The Life of a Mediterranean Peasant*, New York 1992, p. 372: "I take it absolutely for granted that Jesus was crucified under Pontius Pilate."; J. Klausner, *Jesus von Nazareth. Seine Zeit, sein Leben und seine Lehre*. Autorisierte Übersetzung aus dem Hebräischen von Dr. Walter Fischel, Berlin 1930, pp. 484–493; G. Vermes, *Jesus the Jew. A Historian's Reading of the Gospels*, Philadelphia 1993, p. 37.

² "Jesus war der «König-Messias», also, vom Standpunkt des römischen Gouverneurs aus, der natürlich kein Verständnis für die geistige Seite der messianischen Idee haben konnte, der «König der Juden.» Das bedeutete Verrat am römischen Kaiser, für welches Verbrechen die *lex Juliana* nur eine Strafe kannte: den Tod. Die vorgeschriebene Todesstrafe für Rebellen und Verräter aber war die Kreuzigung" (J. Klausner, op. cit., p. 486). "It was not on a Jewish religious indictment, but on a secular accusation that he was condemned by the emperor's delegate to die shamefully on the Roman cross" (G. Vermes, *Jesus the Jew*, op. cit., p. 37).

³ I decided to exclude the passages which confirm or allude to Jesus as a historical figure but do not refer to his crucifixion.

The earliest Christian sources

Although 13 out of the 27 books of the New Testament are attributed to Paul, only seven letters came from his hand: 1 Thessalonians, 1 Corinthians, Philippians, Philemon, 2 Corinthians, Galatians, and Romans. The remaining books are either ascribed to the Pauline circle (2 Thessalonians, Colossians, and Ephesians) or are considered pseudepigraphic (1 and 2 Timothy, Titus, and especially the anonymous Hebrews). All the undisputed letters of Paul were written between 51–58 C.E.⁴ It means that we have seven earliest sources which confirm the crucifixion of Jesus and his death (between 29 and 33 C.E.). The possible time gap between the event and its earliest documented confirmation comes probably to less than twenty years.

The letters considered to be genuine by the majority of scholars are dated as follows: 1 Thessalonians (ca. 51 C.E.), Philippians (ca. 52–54 C.E.), Philemon (ca. 52–54 C.E.), 1 Corinthians (ca. 53–54 C.E.), Galatians (ca. 55 C.E.), 2 Corinthians (ca. 55–56 C.E.), and Romans (ca. 55–58 C.E.). Some scholars would argue that the substantiation of the life and message of Jesus in Paul's letters are reliable but meager.⁵ Nevertheless, Paul's Christology stresses the most important facts of Jesus' life, especially in its final period. The crucifixion and death of Jesus are mentioned in an evident manner in the following passages (listed chronologically):

εἰ γὰρ πιστεύομεν ὅτι Ἰησοῦς ἀπέθανεν καὶ ἀνέστη, οὕτως καὶ ὁ θεὸς τοὺς κοιμηθέντας διὰ τοῦ Ἰησοῦ ἄξει σὺν αὐτοῖς. (1 Thess 4: 14)⁶

⁴ P. Perkins, *Reading the New Testament. An Introduction*, Mahwah, New Jersey 1988, pp. 4–7; *The Eerdmans Bible Dictionary*. Editor-in-Chief: David Noel Friedman. Associate Editor: Allen C. Myers. Managing Editor: Astrid B. Beck, Grand Rapids, Michigan-Cambridge, U.K. 2000, pp. 1018–1019. *NIV Archaeological Study Bible. An Illustrated Walk Through Biblical History and Culture*. New International Version, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, Michigan 2005, p. 1942. Some scientists date the letters as early as to 50 C.E. or even slightly before that year. See *The New Oxford Annotated Bible. New Revised Standard Version. With The Apocrypha. An Ecumenical Study Bible*. Fully Revised Fourth Edition, New York 2010, p. 2074.

⁵ J. Klausner, op. cit., p. 80: "Historisch beglaubigte Berichte über das Leben Jesu und sein Wirken finden wir bei Paulus überhaupt nicht, außer der Bemerkung, daß er "der Erstgeborene unter vielen Brüdern war", daß er gekreuzigt wurde und in der Nacht vor seiner Erstgeifung mit seiner Jüngern das letzte Abendmahl hielt (...)"; *The Eerdmans Bible Dictionary*, op. cit., p. 702.

⁶ *The Greek New Testament*. Former Editions edited by K. Aland, M. Black, C. M. Martini, B. M. Metzger, and A. Wikgren. Fourth Revised Edition edited by B. Aland, K. Aland, J. Karavidopoulos, C. M. Martini, and B. M. Metzger, in cooperation with the Institute for New Testament Textual Research, Münster/Westphalia, Stuttgart 2008. *A Concise Greek-English Dictionary of the New Testament*. Prepared by B. M. Newman, Jr., Stuttgart 1993, p. 702 (subsequently quoted as GNT). All underlines if not mentioned otherwise, are mine.

For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died. (1 Thess 4:14)⁷

ἐταπείνωσεν ἑαυτὸν γενόμενος ὑπήκοος μέχρι θανάτου, θανάτου δὲ σταυροῦ. (Phil 2:8)
he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on the cross. (Phil 2:8)⁸

οὐ γὰρ ἀπέστειλέν με Χριστὸς βαπτίζειν ἀλλὰ εὐαγγελίζεσθαι, οὐκ ἐν σοφίᾳ λόγου, ἵνα μὴ κενωθῇ ὁ σταυρὸς τοῦ Χριστοῦ. (1 Cor 1:17)

For Christ did not send me to baptize but to proclaim the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of his power. (1 Cor 1:17)⁹

ἡμεῖς δὲ κηρύσσομεν Χριστὸν ἐσταυρωμένον, Ἰουδαίοις μὲν σκάνδαλον ἔθνεσιν δὲ μωρίαν, (1 Cor 1:23)

but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles (1 Cor 1:23)¹⁰

οὐ γὰρ ἔκρινά τι εἰδέναι ἐν ὑμῖν εἰ μὴ Ἰησοῦν Χριστὸν καὶ τοῦτον ἐσταυρωμένον. (1 Cor 2:2)

For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified. (1 Cor 2:2)¹¹

ἦν οὐδεὶς τῶν ἀρχόντων τοῦ αἰῶνος τούτου ἔγνωκεν· εἰ γὰρ ἔγνωσαν, οὐκ ἂν τὸν κύριον τῆς δόξης ἐσταύρωσαν. (1 Cor 2:8)

None of the rulers of this age understood this; for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. (1 Cor 2:8)¹²

ἀπόλλυται γὰρ ὁ ἀσθενῶν ἐν τῇ σῇ γνώσει, ὁ ἀδελφὸς δι' ὃν Χριστὸς ἀπέθανεν. (1 Cor 8:11)

So by your knowledge those weak believers for whom Christ died are destroyed. (1 Cor 8:11)¹³

παρέδωκα γὰρ ὑμῖν ἐν πρώτοις, ὃ καὶ παρέλαβον, ὅτι Χριστὸς ἀπέθανεν ὑπὲρ τῶν ἁμαρτιῶν ἡμῶν κατὰ τὰς γραφάς (1 Cor 15:3)

For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures (1 Cor 15:3)¹⁴

οὐκ ἄθετῶ τὴν χάριν τοῦ θεοῦ· εἰ γὰρ διὰ νόμου δικαιοσύνη, ἄρα Χριστὸς δωρεὰν ἀπέθανεν. (Gal 2:21)

⁷ The Scripture quotations contained herein are from the New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright © 1989, by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A., and are used by permission. All rights reserved. *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, op. cit., p. 2078 (further quoted as NRSV).

⁸ GNT, p. 675; NRSV, p. 2063.

⁹ GNT, p. 568; NRSV, p. 2002.

¹⁰ GNT, p. 569; NRSV, p. 2002.

¹¹ GNT, p. 570; NRSV, p. 2003 (and the footnote): “Paul’s use of the perfect participle, *crucified*, to describe more precisely the Christ whom he proclaims is a provocation to the elite: Paul insists that the present significance of Christ, even after the resurrection, consists in nothing other than that he is the crucified.”

¹² GNT, p. 571; NRSV, p. 2003.

¹³ GNT, p. 585; NRSV, p. 2011.

¹⁴ GNT, pp. 601–602; NRSV, p. 2020.

I do not nullify the grace of God; for if justification comes through the law, then Christ died for nothing (Gal 2:21)¹⁵

Ὡ ἀνόητοι Γαλάται, τίς ὑμᾶς ἐβάσκανεν, οἷς κατ' ὀφθαλμοῦς Ἰησοῦς Χριστὸς προεγράφη ἐσταυρωμένος; (Gal 3:1)

You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly exhibited as crucified! (Gal 3:1)¹⁶

ἐμοὶ δὲ μὴ γένοιτο καυχᾶσθαι εἰ μὴ ἐν τῷ σταυρῷ τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ, δι' οὗ ἐμοὶ κόσμος ἐσταύρωται καὶ γὰρ κόσμῳ. (Gal 6:14)

May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. (Gal 6:14)¹⁷

ἔτι γὰρ Χριστὸς ὄντων ἡμῶν ἀσθενῶν ἔτι κατὰ καιρὸν ὑπὲρ ἀσεβῶν ἀπέθανεν. (Rom 5:6)

For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. (Rom 5:6)¹⁸

συνίστησιν δὲ τὴν ἑαυτοῦ ἀγάπην εἰς ἡμᾶς ὁ θεὸς ὅτι ἔτι ἁμαρτωλῶν ὄντων ἡμῶν Χριστὸς ὑπὲρ ἡμῶν ἀπέθανεν. (Rom 5:8)

But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. (Rom 5:8)¹⁹

εἰδότες ὅτι Χριστὸς ἐγερθεὶς ἐκ νεκρῶν οὐκέτι ἀποθνήσκει, θάνατος αὐτοῦ οὐκέτι κυριεύει. (Rom 6:9)

We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. (Rom 6:9)²⁰

εἰς τοῦτο γὰρ Χριστὸς ἀπέθανεν καὶ ἔζησεν, ἵνα καὶ νεκρῶν καὶ ζώντων κυριεύσῃ. (Rom 14:9)

For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living. (Rom 14:9)²¹

The genuine letters of Paul are closer to the lifetime of Jesus than any other Christian or non-Christian source. One has to emphasize that Paul became Christian a few years after the death of Jesus.²² Therefore, not only was he aware of the existence of Jesus and his crucifixion, but he also believed in his resurrection (see the quotations above).

The letters attributed to Paul, although composed at least in the sixties C.E. or much later, either repeated the facts from Jesus' life as preached by Paul or offered interpretations or defenses of Paul's theology.²³

¹⁵ GNT, p. 643; NRSV, p. 2046.

¹⁶ GNT, p. 643; NRSV, p. 2046 (and the footnote): "*Jesus Christ was publicly exhibited as crucified*, a reference to the graphic description of the crucifixion in Paul's preaching."

¹⁷ GNT, p. 653; NRSV, p. 2050.

¹⁸ GNT, p. 531; NRSV, p. 1983.

¹⁹ GNT, p. 531; NRSV, p. 1983.

²⁰ GNT, p. 533; NRSV, p. 1984.

²¹ GNT, p. 537; NRSV, p. 1995.

²² J. Klausner, op. cit., p. 80: "Denn Paulus wurde Christ ungefähr um das Jahr 32–34." *The Eerdmans Bible Dictionary*, op. cit., p. 1019: "Paul's apostolic call (ca. 31)."

²³ *The Eerdmans Bible Dictionary*, op. cit., pp. 270–271, 411–413, 1018.

So the crucifixion of Jesus is mentioned, for example in an anonymous epistle to the Hebrews (dated between 60 and 90 C.E.):²⁴

ἀφορῶντες εἰς τὸν τῆς πίστεως ἀρχηγὸν καὶ τελειωτὴν Ἰησοῦν, ὃς ἀντὶ τῆς προκειμένης αὐτῷ χαρᾶς ὑπέμεινεν σταυρὸν αἰσχύνῃς καταφρονήσας, ἐν δεξιᾷ τε τοῦ θρόνου τοῦ θεοῦ κεκάθικεν. (Heb 12:2)

looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God. (Heb 12:2)²⁵

The crucifixion of Jesus and his death (both treated as a matter of fact and serving as a base for the Pauline theology and Christology) was thus confirmed by the identified Christian documents (i.e., the above mentioned authentic letters of Paul and the pseudepigraphic epistles) just about twenty years after the event.

Other Christian sources confirming the crucifixion of Jesus and his death are the canonical Gospels composed between ca. 66/70 C.E. (the Gospel according to Mark) and ca. 90 C.E. (the Gospel according to John). The term “gospel” contemporarily refers to a literary genre giving account of Jesus’ life, teaching, trial and death. The word “gospel,” however, has been used in that sense since the second half of the 2nd century.²⁶ Originally, the Greek word τὸ εὐαγγέλιον meant “good news.”²⁷ Thus “Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom” καὶ περιῆγεν ἐν ὅλῃ τῇ Γαλιλαίᾳ, διδάσκων ἐν ταῖς συναγωγαῖς αὐτῶν καὶ κηρύσσων τὸ εὐαγγέλιον τῆς βασιλείας (Mt 4:23). Earlier, in the 1st century this word had referred to the whole Christian message mainly that of Jesus’s death and its significance in God’s salvific plan.²⁸ That shift of meaning could have influenced the Qur’anic understanding of the Gospel as the single Book given (revealed) to Jesus who preached it, and the fragments of which survived in the received canonical Gospels and other writings.²⁹

The Gospel according to Mark³⁰ is chronologically the earliest canonical Gospel (composed ca. 66 or shortly after 70 C.E.), being also a source of two

²⁴ NRSV, p. 2103; *The Eerdmans Bible Dictionary*, op. cit., p. 569.

²⁵ GNT, p. 767; NRSV, p. 2116.

²⁶ *The Eerdmans Bible Dictionary*, op. cit., p. 521–523; NRSV, p. 1743–1744.

²⁷ W. D. Mounce, *The Analytical Lexicon to the Greek New Testament*, Grand Rapids, Michigan 1993, p. 222.

²⁸ NRSV, p. 1752; GNT, p. 11; *The Eerdmans Bible Dictionary*, op. cit., p. 522.

²⁹ *Dictionary of the Holy Qur’ân. Arabic Words – English Meanings (With Notes)*. By ‘Abul Mannân ‘Omar, Hockessin, DE 2008, pp. 552–553; *The Holy Qur-ân. English translation of the meanings and Commentary*. Muṣḥaf Al-Madinah An-Nabawiyah. Revised & Edited By The Presidency of Islamic Researches, Ifta, Call and Guidance, Al-Madinah Al-Munawarah 1410 H, pp. 333–334.

³⁰ We must not forget that the Gospel does not mention the name of its author. It was ascribed to Mark in the early 2nd century (*The Eerdmans Bible Dictionary*, op. cit., p. 859).

other Synoptic Gospels:³¹ according to Matthew and according to Luke.³² The crucifixion and death of Jesus is narrated in Mk 15 in the following passages:

20 καὶ ὅτε ἐνέπαιξαν αὐτῷ, ἐξέδυσαν αὐτὸν τὴν πορφύραν καὶ ἐνέδυσαν αὐτὸν τὰ ἱμάτια αὐτοῦ. καὶ ἐξάγουσιν αὐτὸν ἵνα σταυρώσουσιν αὐτόν.

After mocking him, they stripped him of the purple cloak and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him out to crucify him.

21 καὶ ἀγγαρεύουσιν παράγοντά τινα Σίμωνα Κυρηναῖον ἐρχόμενον ἀπ’ ἀγροῦ, τὸν πατέρα Ἀλεξάνδρου καὶ Ρούφου, ἵνα ἄρῃ τὸν σταυρὸν αὐτοῦ.

They compelled a passer-by, who was coming in from the country, to carry his cross; it was Simon of Cyrene, the father of Alexander and Rufus.

22 καὶ φέρουσιν αὐτὸν ἐπὶ τὸν Γολγοθᾶν τόπον, ὃ ἐστὶν μεθερμηνευόμενον Κρανίου Τόπος. Then they brought Jesus to the place called Golgotha (which means the place of a skull).

23 καὶ ἐδίδουν αὐτῷ ἐσμυρνισμένον οἶνον· ὃς δὲ οὐκ ἔλαβεν.

And they offered him wine mixed with myrrh; but he did not take it.

24 καὶ σταυροῦσιν αὐτὸν καὶ διαμερίζονται τὰ ἱμάτια αὐτοῦ βάλλοντες κλῆρον ἐπ’ αὐτὰ τίς τί ἄρῃ.

And they crucified him, and divided his clothes among them, casting lots to decide what each should take.

25 ἥν δὲ ὥρα τρίτη καὶ ἐσταύρωσαν αὐτόν.

It was nine o’clock in the morning when they crucified him.

26 καὶ ἦν ἡ ἐπιγραφὴ τῆς αἰτίας αὐτοῦ ἐπιγεγραμμένη, Ὁ βασιλεὺς τῶν Ἰουδαίων.

The inscription of the charge against him read: “The King of the Jews.”

27 καὶ σὺν αὐτῷ σταυροῦσιν δύο ληστές, ἓνα ἐκ δεξιῶν καὶ ἓνα ἐξ εὐωνύμων αὐτοῦ.

And with him they crucified two bandits, one on his right and one on his left.

34 καὶ τῇ ἐνάτῃ ὥρᾳ ἐβόησεν ὁ Ἰησοῦς φωνῇ μεγάλῃ, **Ελωι ελωι λεμα σαβαχθανι**; ὃ ἐστὶν μεθερμηνευόμενον **Ὁ θεός μου ὁ θεός μου, εἰς τί ἐγκατέλιπές με**;

At three o’clock Jesus cried out with a loud voice, “Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?” which means, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

35 καὶ τινες τῶν παρεστηκότων ἀκούσαντες ἔλεγον, Ἴδε Ἡλίαν φωνεῖ.

When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, “Listen, he is calling for Elijah.”

36 δραμὼν δὲ τις [καί] γεμίσας σπόγγον ὄξους περιθεὶς καλᾶμῳ ἐπότιζεν αὐτὸν λέγων, Ἄφετε ἴδωμεν εἰ ἔρχεται Ἡλίας καθελεῖν αὐτόν.

And someone ran, filled a sponge with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink, saying, “Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to take him down.”

³¹ The Synoptic Gospels are considered to be the earliest Gospels (G. Vermes, *The Authentic Gospel of Jesus*, London–New York–Camberwell, Victoria–Toronto–New Delhi–Auckland–Rosebank 2004, p. xi).

³² G. Theissen, A. Merz, *The Historical Jesus. A Comprehensive Guide*, Minneapolis, MN 1998, pp. 25–26.

37 ὁ δὲ Ἰησοῦς ἄφεις φωνὴν μεγάλην ἐξέπνευσεν.

Then Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last.³³

The importance attached to the Gospel of Mark is due to the fact that it was available to the authors of the Gospels of Matthew and Luke (their sources would be then Mark and a hypothetical Q source).³⁴ The passages quoted below show the similarities between the text of the Gospel according to Mark and the other Synoptic Gospels: according to Matthew (composed in the 80s C.E.) and according to Luke (composed 85 C.E. or later):³⁵

Mt 27

32 Ἐξερχόμενοι δὲ εὗρον ἄνθρωπον Κυρηναῖον ὀνόματι Σίμωνα, τοῦτον ἠγγάρευσαν ἵνα ἄρῃ τὸν σταυρὸν αὐτοῦ.

As they went out, they came upon a man from Cyrene named Simon; they compelled this man to carry his cross.

33 καὶ ἐλθόντες εἰς τόπον λεγόμενον Γολγοθᾶ, ὃ ἐστὶν Κρανίου Τόπος λεγόμενος,
And when they came to a place called Golgotha (which means Place of a Skull),

34 ἔδωκαν αὐτῷ πιεῖν οἶνον μετὰ χολῆς μεμιγμένον· καὶ γευσάμενος οὐκ ἠθέλησεν πιεῖν.
they offered him wine to drink, mixed with gall; but when he tasted it, he would not drink it.

35 σταυρώσαντες δὲ αὐτὸν διεμερίσαντο τὰ ἱμάτια αὐτοῦ βαλλόντες κλῆρον,
And when they had crucified him, they divided his clothes among themselves by casting lots;

36 καὶ καθήμενοι ἐτήρουν αὐτὸν ἐκεῖ.
then they sat down there and kept watch over him.

37 καὶ ἐπέθηκαν ἐπάνω τῆς κεφαλῆς αὐτοῦ τὴν αἰτίαν αὐτοῦ γεγραμμένην· Οὗτός ἐστιν Ἰησοῦς ὁ βασιλεὺς τῶν Ἰουδαίων.

Over his head they put the charge against him, which read, "This is Jesus, the King of the Jews."

38 Τότε σταυροῦνται σὺν αὐτῷ δύο λησταί, εἷς ἐκ δεξιῶν καὶ εἷς ἐξ εὐωνύμων.
Then two bandits were crucified with him, one on his right and one on his left.

46 περὶ δὲ τὴν ἐνάτην ὥραν ἀνεβόησεν ὁ Ἰησοῦς φωνὴ μεγάλη λέγων, **Ἡλι ηλι λεμα σαβαχθανι**; τοῦτ' ἐστὶν, **Θεέ μου θεέ μου, ἵνατί με ἐγκατέλιπες**;

And about three o'clock Jesus cried with a loud voice, "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?" that is, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

47 τινὲς δὲ τῶν ἐκεῖ ἐστηκότων ἀκούσαντες ἔλεγον ὅτι Ἥλιαν φωνεῖ οὗτος.

When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, "This man is calling for Elijah."

48 καὶ εὐθὺς δραμὼν εἷς ἐξ αὐτῶν καὶ λαβὼν σπόγγον πλήσας τε ὄξους καὶ περιθεὶς καλάμῳ ἐπότιζεν αὐτόν.

³³ GNT, p. 186–187; NRSV, p. 1822–1823.

³⁴ *The Eerdmans Bible Dictionary*, op. cit., p. 1745.

³⁵ NRSV, pp. 1746, 1827.

At once one of them ran and got a sponge, filled it with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink.

49 οἱ δὲ λοιποὶ ἔλεγον, Ἄφες ἴδωμεν εἰ ἔρχεται Ἡλίας σῶσαι αὐτόν.

But the others said, "Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to save him."

50 ὁ δὲ Ἰησοῦς πάλιν κράζας φωνῇ μεγάλῃ ἠφῆκεν τὸ πνεῦμα.

Then Jesus cried again with a loud voice and breathed his last.³⁶

Lk 23

26 Καὶ ὡς ἀπήγαγον αὐτόν, ἐπιλαβόμενοι Σίμωνά τινα Κυρηναῖον ἐρχόμενον ἀπ' ἀγροῦ ἐπέθηκαν αὐτῷ τὸν σταυρὸν φέρειν ὅπισθεν τοῦ Ἰησοῦ.

As they led him away, they seized a man, Simon of Cyrene, who was coming from the country, and they laid the cross on him, and made him carry it behind Jesus.

33 καὶ ὅτε ἦλθον ἐπὶ τὸν τόπον τὸν καλούμενον Κρανίον, ἐκεῖ ἐσταύρωσαν αὐτόν καὶ τοὺς κακούργους, ὃν μὲν ἐκ δεξιῶν ὃν δὲ ἐξ ἀριστερῶν.

When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left.

38 ἦν δὲ καὶ ἐπιγραφή ἐπ' αὐτῷ, Ὁ βασιλεὺς τῶν Ἰουδαίων οὗτος.

There was also an inscription over him, "This is the King of the Jews."

46 καὶ φωνήσας φωνῇ μεγάλῃ ὁ Ἰησοῦς εἶπεν, Πάτερ, εἰς χεῖράς σου παρατίθεμαι τὸ πνεῦμά μου. τοῦτο δὲ εἰπὼν ἐξέπνευσεν.

Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit." Having said this, he breathed his last.³⁷

Most scholars consider the Synoptic Gospels to be a reliable source of historical information about Jesus, and they view his crucifixion and death as indisputable.³⁸ One, however, has to bear in mind that "A historical genre does not necessarily guarantee historical accuracy or reliability, and neither the evangelists nor their first readers engaged in historical analysis."³⁹ Still, there is no reason to question the historicity of the Synoptic Gospels in their core.⁴⁰

Even the last Gospel according to John (ca. 90/100 C.E.), although it has little in common with the Synoptic Gospels, includes some historical details

³⁶ GNT, pp. 100–112; NRSV, pp. 1788–1889.

³⁷ GNT, pp. 302, 303, 304; NRSV, pp. 1874, 1875.

³⁸ "Jesus' death by execution under Pontius Pilate is as sure as anything historical can ever be. For, if no follower of Jesus had written anything for one hundred years after his crucifixion, we would still know about him from two authors not among his supporters. Their names are Flavius Josephus and Cornelius Tacitus" (J. D. Crossan, *Who Killed Jesus? Exposing the Roots of Anti-Semitism in the Gospel Story of the Death of Jesus*, New York 1996, p. 5).

³⁹ NRSV, p. 1744.

⁴⁰ "Andererseits wird es gerade durch die ausgedehnten Forschungen auf allen Gebieten des Judentums zur Zeit des Zweiten Tempels unmöglich, die Historizität der synoptischen Evangelien völlig zu leugnen" (J. Klausner, op. cit., p. 168).

concerning the crucifixion and death of Jesus, even if the account of passion differs markedly.⁴¹

Jn 19

16 τότε οὖν παρέδωκεν αὐτὸν αὐτοῖς ἵνα σταυρωθῇ. Παρέλαβον οὖν τὸν Ἰησοῦν,
Then he handed him over to them to be crucified. So they took Jesus;

17 καὶ βαστάζων ἑαυτῷ τὸν σταυρὸν ἐξῆλθεν εἰς τὸν λεγόμενον Κρανίου Τόπον, ὃ λέγεται Ἑβραϊστὶ Γολγοθᾶ,
and carrying the cross by himself, he went out to what is called The Place of the Skull, which in Hebrew is called Golgotha.

18 ὅπου αὐτὸν ἐσταύρωσαν, καὶ μετ' αὐτοῦ ἄλλους δύο ἐντεῦθεν καὶ ἐντεῦθεν, μέσον δὲ τὸν Ἰησοῦν.

There they crucified him, and with him two others, one on either side, with Jesus between them.

19 ἔγραψεν δὲ καὶ τίτλον ὁ Πιλάτος καὶ ἔθηκεν ἐπὶ τοῦ σταυροῦ· ἦν δὲ γεγραμμένον, Ἰησοῦς ὁ Ναζωραῖος ὁ βασιλεὺς τῶν Ἰουδαίων.

Pilate also had an inscription written and put on the cross. It read, "Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews."

28 Μετὰ τοῦτο εἰδὼς ὁ Ἰησοῦς ὅτι ἤδη πάντα τετέλεσται, ἵνα τελειωθῇ ἡ γραφή, λέγει, Διψῶ.
After this, when Jesus knew that all was now finished, he said (in order to fulfill the scripture), "I am thirsty."

29 σκεῦος ἔκειτο ὄξους μεστόν· σπόγγον οὖν μεστὸν ὄξους ὑσσώπῳ περιθέντες προσήνεγκαν αὐτοῦ τῷ στόματι.

A jar full of sour wine was standing there. So they put a sponge full of the wine on a branch of hyssop and held it to his mouth.

30 ὅτε οὖν ἔλαβεν τὸ ὄξος [ὁ] Ἰησοῦς εἶπεν, Τετέλεσται, καὶ κλίνας τὴν κεφαλὴν παρέδωκεν τὸ πνεῦμα.

When Jesus had received the wine, he said, "It is finished." Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

31 Οἱ οὖν Ἰουδαῖοι, ἐπεὶ παρασκευὴ ἦν, ἵνα μὴ μείνῃ ἐπὶ τοῦ σταυροῦ τὰ σώματα ἐν τῷ σαββάτῳ, ἦν γὰρ μεγάλη ἡ ἡμέρα ἐκείνου τοῦ σαββάτου, ἠρώτησαν τὸν Πιλάτον ἵνα κατεργῶσιν αὐτῶν τὰ σκέλη καὶ ἀρθῶσιν.

Since it was the day of Preparation, the Jews did not want the bodies left on the cross during the Sabbath, especially because that Sabbath was a day of great solemnity. So they asked Pilate to have the legs of the crucified men broken and the bodies removed.

32 ἤλθον οὖν οἱ στρατιῶται καὶ τοῦ μὲν πρώτου κατέαξαν τὰ σκέλη καὶ τοῦ ἄλλου τοῦ συνσταυρωθέντος αὐτῷ·

⁴¹ NRSV, p. 1745; J. Klausner, op. cit., p. 165–166: "Es ist möglich, daß auch das vierte Evangelium einige historische Einzelheiten enthält, die dem Verfasser, der gewiß nicht Jesu Jünger Johannes war, mündlich überliefert wurden; aber im allgemeinen kommt ihm nur die Bedeutung eines *theologischen*, nicht die eines historischen oder biographischen Dokuments zu."; J. D. Crossan, *Who Killed Jesus?* op. cit., p. 20; G. Vermes, *The Authentic Gospel of Jesus*, op. cit., pp. xii–xiii).

Then the soldiers came and broke the legs of the first and of the other who had been crucified with him.

33 ἐπὶ δὲ τὸν Ἰησοῦν ἐλθόντες, ὡς εἶδον ἦδη αὐτὸν τεθνηκότα, οὐ κατέαζαν αὐτοῦ τὰ σκέλη,
But when they came to Jesus and saw that he was already dead, they did not break his legs.

34 ἀλλ' εἷς τῶν στρατιωτῶν λόγχῃ αὐτοῦ τὴν πλευρὰν ἐνυξεν, καὶ ἐξῆλθεν εὐθὺς αἷμα καὶ ὕδωρ.
Instead, one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once blood and water came out.⁴²

The historical fact of Jesus' crucifixion and his death on the cross is a vital part of Christian theology. Christ's sacrifice is understood in terms of expiation, the cancelling of guilt and cleansing (pardoning) of sin through his death by crucifixion.⁴³ Denying the crucifixion is denying Christianity as a whole.

The Greco-Roman sources

Testimonium Flavianum

One of the most important sources describing various groups and factions in the Jewish society and the environment in which Christianity was born, is the historiographical work Ἰουδαϊκὴ Ἀρχαιολογία (*The Antiquities of the Jews*). It was composed in 93/94 C.E. by Flavius Josephus, born יוסף בן מתתיהו Yoseph ben Mattatyahu in 37 C.E. who died ca. 100 C.E.⁴⁴ There is a long paragraph in book 18, chapter 3, known as *Testimonium Flavianum* in which Josephus describes the condemnation and crucifixion of Jesus. The version, which has survived (if authentic),⁴⁵ is not, however, thoroughly genuine as the original text of the passage became later a subject to Christian interpolations. Nevertheless, many scholars agree that the text of the section without additions came from Flavius Josephus' pen.⁴⁶ The Greek text of Flavius Josephus is presented here in its standard version:⁴⁷

⁴² GNT, pp. 397, 398, 399; NRSV, pp. 1913, 1914.

⁴³ *The Eerdmans Bible Dictionary*, op. cit., p. 128.

⁴⁴ J. Klausner, op. cit., p. 67; M. Hadas-Lebel, *Józef Flawiusz, Żyd rzymski*. Translated by: J. Radożycki, Warszawa 1997, pp. 11, 154; *The Eerdmans Bible Dictionary*, op. cit., pp. 736–737.

⁴⁵ All surviving Greek manuscripts of Josephus' *Antiquities of the Jews* contain the *Testimonium Flavianum*. The earliest Greek manuscript of the *Antiquities*, the Ambrosianus 370 (F 128), containing the *Testimonium*, dates from the eleventh century. For a full listing, see H. Schreckenberg, *Die Flavius-Josephus-Tradition in Antike und Mittelalter*, Leiden 1972.

⁴⁶ J. Klausner, op. cit., pp. 70–71; G. Vermes, *Jesus the Jew*, op. cit., pp. 51, 79; M. Hadas-Lebel, op. cit., pp. 169–170; J. D. Crossan, *Jesus. A Revolutionary Biography*, San Francisco 1995, p. 145; J. D. Crossan, *Who Killed Jesus?* op. cit., pp. 5–6.

⁴⁷ *Flavii Iosephi Opera Omnia*. Post Immanuelem Bekkerum recognovit Samuel Adrianus Naber. Volumen quartum. Lipsiae MDCCCXCIII, p. 147.

<63> [γίνεται δὲ κατὰ τοῦτον τὸν χρόνον Ἰησοῦς, σοφὸς ἀνὴρ, εἴ γ' ἄνδρα αὐτὸν λέγειν χρή. ἦν γὰρ παραδόξων ἔργων ποιητής, διδάσκαλος ἀνθρώπων τῶν ἡδονῇ τάληθ' δεχομένων· καὶ πολλοὺς μὲν Ἰουδαίους, πολλοὺς δὲ καὶ τοῦ Ἑλληνικοῦ ἐπηγάγετο. ὁ Χριστὸς οὗτος ἦν. <64> καὶ αὐτὸν ἐνδείξει τῶν πρώτων ἀνδρῶν παρ' ἡμῖν σταυρῷ ἐπιτετιμηκότος Πιλάτου, οὐκ ἐπαύσαντο οἱ τὸ πρῶτον αὐτὸν ἀγαπήσαντες· ἐφάνη γὰρ αὐτοῖς τρίτην ἔχων ἡμέραν πάλιν ζῶν, τῶν θείων προφητῶν ταῦτά τε καὶ ἄλλα μυρία θαυμάσια περὶ αὐτοῦ εἰρηκότων. εἰσέτι τε νῦν τῶν Χριστιανῶν ἀπὸ τοῦδε ὀνομασμένον οὐκ ἐπέλιπε τὸ φύλον.]

3. Now there was about this time Jesus, a wise man, if it be lawful to call him a man, for he was a doer of wonderful works – a teacher of such men as receive the truth with pleasure. He drew over to him both many of the Jews and many of the Gentiles. He was [the] Christ; and when Pilate, at the suggestion of the principal men amongst us, had condemned him to the cross,⁴⁸ those that loved him at the first did not forsake him; for he appeared to them alive again the third day,⁴⁹ as the Divine prophets had foretold these and ten thousand other wonderful things concerning him; and the tribe of Christians, so named from him, are not extinct at this day.⁵⁰

The earliest quotation of the *Testimonium Flavianum* is to be found in the Greek *Historia Ecclesiastica* (the Church History) of Eusebius, the bishop of Caesarea. The History was completed 326 C.E.:

γίνεται δὲ κατὰ τοῦτον τὸν χρόνον Ἰησοῦς, σοφὸς ἀνὴρ, εἴ γε ἄνδρα αὐτὸν λέγειν χρή. ἦν γὰρ παραδόξων ἔργων ποιητής, διδάσκαλος ἀνθρώπων τῶν ἡδονῇ τάληθ' δεχομένων, καὶ πολλοὺς μὲν τῶν Ἰουδαίων, πολλοὺς δὲ καὶ ἀπὸ τοῦ Ἑλληνικοῦ ἐπηγάγετο. ὁ Χριστὸς οὗτος ἦν. καὶ αὐτὸν ἐνδείξει τῶν πρώτων ἀνδρῶν παρ' ἡμῖν σταυρῷ ἐπιτετιμηκότος Πιλάτου, οὐκ ἐπαύσαντο οἱ τὸ πρῶτον ἀγαπήσαντες· ἐφάνη γὰρ αὐτοῖς τρίτην ἔχων ἡμέραν πάλιν ζῶν, τῶν θείων προφητῶν ταῦτά τε καὶ ἄλλα μυρία περὶ αὐτοῦ θαυμάσια εἰρηκότων. εἰς ἔτι τε νῦν τῶν Χριστιανῶν ἀπὸ τοῦδε ὀνομασμένων οὐκ ἐπέλιπε τὸ φύλον.

As one can see there is no difference between the *Testimonium Flavianum* and its quotation in Eusebiuses' work.

The scholars who believe in the partial authenticity of the *Testimonium* and the existence of a reference to Jesus within it suggest some modifications in the standard version. The subsequent reconstruction of the supposed original text of the *Testimonium Flavianum*, removing later Christian additions, follows the proposals of Klausner, Vermes and Crossan:⁵¹

<63> [γίνεται δὲ κατὰ τοῦτον τὸν χρόνον Ἰησοῦς, σοφὸς ἀνὴρ, εἴ γ' ἄνδρα αὐτὸν λέγειν χρή. ἦν γὰρ παραδόξων ἔργων ποιητής, διδάσκαλος ἀνθρώπων τῶν ἡδονῇ τάληθ' δεχομένων· καὶ πολλοὺς μὲν Ἰουδαίους, πολλοὺς δὲ καὶ τοῦ Ἑλληνικοῦ ἐπηγάγετο. ὁ Χριστὸς οὗτος ἦν. <64> καὶ αὐτὸν ἐνδείξει τῶν πρώτων ἀνδρῶν παρ' ἡμῖν σταυρῷ ἐπιτετιμηκότος Πιλάτου, οὐκ ἐπαύσαντο οἱ τὸ πρῶτον αὐτὸν ἀγαπήσαντες· ἐφάνη γὰρ αὐτοῖς τρίτην ἔχων ἡμέραν πάλιν ζῶν, τῶν θείων προφητῶν ταῦτά τε καὶ ἄλλα μυρία θαυμάσια περὶ αὐτοῦ εἰρηκότων. εἰσέτι τε νῦν τῶν Χριστιανῶν ἀπὸ τοῦδε ὀνομασμένον οὐκ ἐπέλιπε τὸ φύλον.]

⁴⁸ A.D. 33, April 3 [footnote in the text].

⁴⁹ April 5 [footnote in the text].

⁵⁰ *The Works of Flavius Josephus*. Translated by William Whiston, London [1873], p. 426.

⁵¹ J. Klausner, op. cit., p. 68; J. D. Crossan, *Who Killed Jesus?* op. cit., p. 5.

3. Now there was about this time Jesus, a wise man, if it be lawful to call him a man, for he was a doer of wonderful works, a teacher of such men as receive the truth with pleasure. He drew over to him both many of the Jews and many of the Gentiles. ~~He was [the] Christ~~; and when Pilate, at the suggestion of the principal men amongst us, had condemned him to the cross, those that loved him at the first did not forsake him; ~~for he appeared to them alive again the third day, as the Divine prophets had foretold these and ten thousand other wonderful things concerning him~~; and the tribe of Christians, so named from him, are not extinct at this day.⁵²

According to Vermes, we can also correct the sentence “He was the Christ,” Greek ὁ Χριστὸς οὗτος ἦν., inserting the word “called” into it: “He was [called] the Christ,” Greek ὁ Χριστὸς οὗτος λεγόμενος ἦν. That correction seems to be supported by another reference to Jesus in the work of Josephus: “the brother of Jesus, who was called Christ, whose name was James,” Greek τὸν ἀδελφὸν Ἰησοῦ τοῦ λεγομένου Χριστοῦ, Ἰάκωβος ὄνομα αὐτοῦ.⁵³ Modern scholars overwhelmingly consider this remark, including its reference to “the brother of Jesus called Christ,” as authentic and have rejected its being the result of a later interpolation.⁵⁴

The above-mentioned reference to James can be treated as a documentary validation for the authenticity of the *Testimonium Flavianum*. Let us quote G. Vermes, “Josephus’s identification of James as ‘the brother of Jesus called Christ’ would have made no sense unless there was an earlier mention of Jesus in Antiquities. The *Testimonium Flavianum* is likely to be this prior reference.”⁵⁵

A number of scholars use some later versions of the *Testimonium Flavianum* to corroborate the modifications accepted, e.g., by Vermes, especially when these versions contained the phrase that expressed a doubt in Jesus being the Christ (the Messiah).

The earliest surviving Christian text which contains the modified locution about the Christ⁵⁶ is the Latin passage from the late 4th century work “De viris inlustribus,” chapter 13, of Jerome of Strydon:⁵⁷

⁵² Compare the proposal of G. Vermes (who uses the 18th century translation of Whiston, too): “Now there was about this time Jesus, a wise man, [...] for he was a doer of wonderful works, a teacher of such men as receive the truth with pleasure. He drew over to him [both] many of the Jews [and many of the Gentiles?]. He was [called] the Christ. And when Pilate, at the suggestion of the principal men amongst us, had condemned him to the cross, those that loved him at the first did not forsake him; [...] And the tribe of Christians, so named from him, are not extinct at this day.” (*Jesus in the Eyes of Josephus*, “Standpoint” January/February 2010, <http://standpointmag.co.uk/jesus-in-the-eyes-of-josephus-features-jan-10-geza-vermes?page=1%2C0%2C0%2C0%2C0%2C0%2C0%2C0%2C0%2C0%2C0%2C5>).

⁵³ *The Works of Flavius Josephus*, op. cit., p. 475; J. Klausner, op. cit., p. 73.

⁵⁴ J. Klausner, op. cit., p. 74–75; G. Vermes, *Jesus in the Eyes of Josephus*, op. cit.; see also Z. Baras, *The Testimonium Flavianum and Martyrdom of James in: Josephus, Judaism, and Christianity*. Edited by L. H. Feldman and G. Hata, Detroit, Michigan 1987, pp. 338–348.

⁵⁵ G. Vermes, *Jesus in the Eyes of Josephus*, op. cit.

⁵⁶ The underline is mine.

⁵⁷ Hieronymus und Gennadius, *De viris inlustribus*. Herausgegeben von C. A. Bernoulli, Freiburg i. B. und Leipzig 1895, p. 16. The work was written in Bethlehem in 392–393; see

Hic in octauo [decimo] antiquitatum libro manifestissime confitetur propter magnitudinem signorum Christum a pharisaeis interfectum et Iohannem baptistam vere prophetam fuisse et propter interfectionem Iacobi apostoli Hierosolymam dirutam. Scripsit autem de Domino in hunc modum: Eodem tempore fuit Iesus, sapiens uir, si tamen uirum eum oportet dicere. Erat enim mirabilium patratum operum et doctor eorum qui libenter uera suscipiunt; plurimos quoque tam de Iudaeis quam de gentilibus habuit sectatores et credebatur esse Christus. Cumque inuidia nostrorum principum cruci eum Pilatus addixisset, nihilominus qui primum dilexerant, perseuerauerunt. Apparuit enim eis tertia die uiuens. Multa et haec et alia mirabilia carminibus prophetarum de eo uaticinantibus et usque hodie Christianorum gens ab hoc sortita uocabulum non defecit.

In the eighth book of his Antiquities he most openly acknowledges that Christ was slain by the Pharisees on account of the greatness of his miracles, that John the Baptist was truly a prophet, and that Jerusalem was destroyed because of the murder of James the apostle. He wrote also concerning the Lord after this fashion: "In this same time was Jesus, a wise man, if indeed it be lawful to call him man. For he was a worker of wonderful miracles, and a teacher of those who freely receive the truth. He had very many adherents also, both of the Jews and of the Gentiles, and was believed to be Christ, and when through the envy of our chief men Pilate had crucified him, nevertheless those who had loved him at first continued to the end, for he appeared to them the third day alive. Many things, both these and other wonderful things are in the songs of the prophets who prophesied concerning him and the sect of Christians, so named from Him, exists to the present day."⁵⁸

The 10th century universal history كتاب العنوان *Kitab al-'Unwān (The Book of the Heading)*, written by an Arab historian named Agapius of Manbij (محبوب بن قوصطانطين الرومي المنبجي *Maḥbūb ibn Qūṣṭānṭīn ar-Rūmī al-Manbiḡī*), contains a version of the *Testimonium Flavianum* which according to some scholars is closer to what one would expect Josephus to have written.⁵⁹

ولذلك يوسفوس العبراني فإنه قال في ميامره التي كتبها على شر اليهود أنه كان في هذا الزمان رجل حكيم يقال له يسوعا وكانت له سيرة حسنة وعلم أنه فاضل وأنه يتلمذ له كثير من الناس من اليهود وسائر الشعوب وكان فيلاطس قضى عليه بالصلب والموت والذين تتلمذوا له يدعوا تلمذته وذكروا أنه ظهر لهم بعد ثلاثة أيام من صلبه وأنه عاش قلعه هو المسيح الذي قالت عنه الانبياء الا عجب فهذا قول يوسفوس واصحابه في سيدنا المسيح له المجد⁶⁰

wa-li-dālika Yūsufūsu l-'Ibrāniyyu fa-'inna-hu qāla fī miyāmīri-hi l-latī kataba-hā 'alā šarri l-Yahūdi 'inna-hu kāna fī hāḡa z-zamāni raḡulun ḡakīmūn yuqālu la-hu 'īsū 'ā wa-kānat la-hu sīratun ḡasanatun wa-'ulima 'anna-hu fāḡilun wa-'anna-hu yutalmiḡu la-hu kaḡīrun min an-nāsi min al-Yahūdi wa-sā'iri š-šu'ūbi wa-kāna Fīlāḡusu qaḡā 'alay-hi bi-š-ṡalbi

A. D. Booth, "The Chronology of Jerome's Early Years," *Phoenix* vol. 35 (1981), p. 237–259, and J. N. D. Kelly, *Jerome. His Life, Writings, and Controversies*, London 1975 (Polish version: J. N. D. Kelly, *Hieronim. Życie, pisma, spory*. Translated by R. Wiśniewski, Warszawa 2003, p. 79).

⁵⁸ *A Select Library Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*. Translated into English with Prolegomena and Explanatory Notes under the Editorial Supervision of P. Schaff and H. Wage. In Connection with a Number of Patristic Scholars of Europe and America. Volume III. *Theodoret, Jerome, Gennadius, Rufinus. Historical Writings, etc.*, New York – Oxford and London 1892, p. 366.

⁵⁹ See S. Pines, *An Arabic Version of the Testimonium Flavianum and its Implications*, Jerusalem 1971, and Z. Baras, op. cit., p. 340.

⁶⁰ A. A. Vasiliev, *Kitab al-'Unvan (Histoire universelle écrite par Agapius de Menbidj)*, seconde partie, fasc. I [in:] *Patrologia Orientalis*. Tomus septimus, Paris 1911, pp. 471–472.

wa-l-mawti wa-l-laḏīna tatalmaḏū la-hu yad'ū talmaḏata-hu wa-ḏakarū 'anna-hu zahara la-hum ba'da talāḏati 'ayyāmi min ṣalbi-hi wa-'anna-hu 'āša fa-la-'alla-hu huwa l-masīhu l-laḏi qālat 'an-hu l-'anbiyā'u l-'a 'āgība fa-hāda qawlu Yūsifusa wa-'aṣḥābi-hi fī sayyidi-nā l-masīhi la-hu l-maḏdu

Therefore, Josephus the Hebrew said as follows in his tractates written about the wickedness⁶¹ of the Jews: At this time there was a wise man called Jesus, whose way of life was exquisite, he was known as a remarkable person, and many people among Jews and other nations became his disciples. Pilate condemned him to death on the cross, but those who had become his disciples spread out his learning. They said that he appeared to them alive three days after his crucifixion. **Perhaps he was the Christ**, about whom the prophets used to say marvelous things. This is the account of Josephus and his companions concerning our Lord Christ, glory be to him.⁶²

Still, the Agapius' version of the *Testimonium Flavianum* differs significantly from all other known versions and it is, as we can see, merely a paraphrase of the common text. Nevertheless, Agapius relied on Syriac sources and most probably his translation is based on a Syriac text containing the *Testimonium Flavianum*.

The literal Syriac translation of the *Testimonium* is quoted in a twelfth century chronicle compiled by Michael the Syrian a Jacobite Syrian Patriarch of Antioch (1166–1199). According to A. Whealey: "It is this version of the *Testimonium*, not the Arabic paraphrase of it, that has the greatest likelihood of being, at least in some ways, more authentic than the textus receptus *Testimonium* because, as noted earlier, this version of the text agrees with Jerome's Latin version of the text in the same crucial regard. The medieval Syriac *Testimonium* that Pines uncovered is very strong evidence for what many scholars had argued since birth of the controversy over the text in the Renaissance, namely that Jerome did not alter the *Testimonium Flavianum* to read "he was believed to be the Christ" but rather that he in fact knew the original version of the *Testimonium*, which he probably found in Eusebius' *Historia Ecclesiastica*, which read "he was believed to be the Christ" rather than "he was the Christ."⁶³

Let us have a look at the Syriac text of Michael the Syrian (book 5, chapter 10):⁶⁴

⁶¹ In the Arabic text we read شر *šarr* "evil, wickedness, mischief; disaster, calamity, etc." (H. Wehr, *A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic*. Edited by J. Milton Cowan, New York 1976, p. 461). In the colloquial Arabic it could mean also "war" (المنجد في اللغة *Al-Munǧid fī l-luġa*, Bayrūt 1984, pp. 379–380), maybe that is why Vasiliev translated the word as "guerres" (wars). Besides, is it possible that Agapius made a mistake and wrongly attributed the passage to other work of Flavius Josephus – *De bello Iudaico*? One has to confirm that there are some Greek manuscripts of the *Bellum Judaicum*, into which the *Testimonium Flavianum* was inserted, although they are younger than Agapius's work (H. Schreckenberg, op. cit.).

⁶² The transcriptions and translations from Arabic and Syriac, if not named, are mine.

⁶³ A. Whealey, *The Testimonium Flavianum Controversy from Antiquity to the Present*, 2000 SBL Josephus Seminar (available online at <http://josephus.yorku.ca/pdf/whealey2000.pdf>, accessed 2012.28.03), p. 8.

⁶⁴ *Chronique de Michel le Syrien, patriarche jacobite d'Antioche (1166–1199)*. Éditée pour la première fois et traduite en français par J.-B. Chabot, Tome I-IV, Paris 1899, 1901, 1905,

[illegible]

dab̄hālēn zaḡnē 'tī wā ḡabrā ḡaḡ ḡakkīmā ḡaṣmeh yeṣū'. 'en wlā lan ḡḡabrā neqrēw. 'tīaw wā ḡēr sā 'ūrā ḡa 'ḡāḡē ṣḡihē wmalḡānā ḡaṣrārā. walsaggayē men yūḡāyē wmen 'ammē talmed. mestabrā ḡamṣīḡā 'tīaw wā. wlaw 'ak sāḡḡūḡā ḡrēṣānaw d'ammā meṡṡul ḡāḡē. yaḡeh pīlaṡōṣ lamṣām brēṣā ḡaṣṡihā wṡūṡ wḡāḡōn ḡēr ḡaḡḡehū lā ṣālliw men ḡubbā. 'eṡḡzī ḡḡōn men ḡāṡar tīḡāṡ yawṡin kaḡ hay. nḡīyyē ḡēr ḡallāḡa ḡḡā ḡāḡēn 'emar 'law tṡihāṡ. w'adṡā lyawṡānā lā mḡardē 'ammā ḡakristyānē ḡṡenneh w'adṡā 'eṣṡammah.

In these times there was a wise man whose name was Jesus, if we can call him a man. He certainly did many celebrated things and was a teacher of truth. He taught numerous Jews and pagans. He was supposed to be the Christ not however according to the leaders of the nation's testimony. Because of this, Pilate had him crucified, and he died. But those who had loved him did not stop to do so. He appeared to them alive after three days. Indeed, astonishing things have been spoken about him by God's prophets. And the Christian nation, which was named after him, has not disappeared until the present day.

The above-mentioned *Ecclesiastical History* must have been translated into the Syriac language quite early. Although the oldest Syriac manuscript of the *Ecclesiastical History* is dated to 462 C.E.⁶⁵ the editor of the *History* William Wright suggests that it was translated into Syriac as early as the time of Eusebius or shortly afterwards.⁶⁶ The Syriac text of the *Testimonium Flavianum* is quoted below:⁶⁷

[illegible]

1910, introduction, corrections et index ajoutés en 1924, I, p. 91, Syriac version, v. 4; compare S. Pines, op. cit., pp. 24 (Syriac text), 26, 31. I am grateful to Professor Sebastian P. Brock who checked for me the photographic edition of the Aleppo manuscript of Michael's chronicle against Chabot's text (*The Edessa-Aleppo Syriac Codex of the Chronicle of Michael the Great*. Edited by G. Y. Ibrahim. Contributions by S. P. Brock and H. Takashi, *Texts and Translations of the Chronicle of Michael the Great*. Vol. 1, Piscataway, NJ 2009, p. 94).

⁶⁵ *The Ecclesiastical History of Eusebius in Syriac*. Edited from the Manuscripts by the late W. Wright, and N. Mclean. With A Collation of the Ancient Armenian Version by A. Merx, Cambridge 1898, pp. vi-ix.

⁶⁶ “Now, as the text presented by these MSS. has evidently passed through the hands of several successive scribes, it seems to follow that these books were translated into Syriac in the lifetime of the authors themselves, or very soon after, for Eusebius died in 340” (*A Short History of the Syriac Literature*. By the late William Wright, London 1894, pp. 61–62).

⁶⁷ *The Ecclesiastical History of Eusebius in Syriac*, op. cit., p. 48.

⁶⁸ The Manuscript C adds ܠܬܝܠܬܐ (The Ecclesiastical History of Eusebius in Syriac, op. cit., p. 48).

men ḥubbeh. 'eḥzī lhōn gēr laḥlāṭā yawmīn tōḥ kaḍ ḥay. danḥiyyē 'allāhāyē hālēn wsaggiyāṭā ḥrēnāyāṭā 'law 'emar dmen tamān 'aḍmā lhāšā. men haw lā ḥsar gensā ḍakristiyanē.

Joseph about the Christ

So at that time there was a wise man whose name was Jesus, if we can call him a man. He certainly was a maker of miracles and a teacher of men, of those who accepted the grace in truth. He brought together numerous Jews and numerous pagans. This one was the Christ. It was him, whom, in front of us, following the example of main leaders, Pilate had crucified. Yet those who had loved him from the beginning did not remain silent. They did not stop to love him; he appeared to them alive after three days. This and many various things have been spoken about him by God's prophets from then until now and the group of Christians has not decreased.

Both Syriac versions of Eusebius' works follow closely the original Greek text of the *Ecclesiastical History*. The phrase about the Christ has no additions.

The *Testimonium Flavianum* (if we accept its authenticity) can be treated as one of the earliest non-Christian written testimonies of Jesus' crucifixion and his death. Nevertheless, its content must have been interpolated rather early because the version of Eusebius is not at variance with the *textus receptus*. Still, there must have been some earlier versions of the *Testimonium Flavianum* which left their traces in the quotations made by Jerome, Agapius, and Michael the Syrian. That view is supported by those scholars who treat the *Testimonium Flavianum* as genuine (although altered by a Christian reviser).⁷⁴

Tacitus

Publius Cornelius Tacitus (57–117 C.E.), a Roman historian, is the author of the most important pagan reference to the death of Jesus.⁷⁵ It is to be found in book 15, chapter 44 of his *Annales* (Annals), written ca. 116 C.E.

ergo abolendo rumorī Nero subdidit reos et quaesitissimis poenis affecit, quos per flagitia invisos vulgus Christianos appellabat. auctor nominis eius Christus Tiberio imperitante per procuratorem Pontium Pilatum supplicio affectus erat; repressaue in praesens exitiabilis superstitio rursum erumpebat, non modo per Iudaeam, originem eius mali, sed per urbem etiam, quo cuncta undique atrocia aut pudenda confluunt celebranturque. igitur primum correpti qui fatebantur, deinde indicio eorum multitudo ingens haud proinde in crimine incendii quam odio humani generis convicti sunt. et pereuntibus addita ludibria, ut ferarum tergis contexti

⁷⁴ "Since it is scarcely credible that the writers could have independently modified the *Testimonium* in this same way, their readings must reflect an original Greek *Testimonium* reading something like 'he was believed to be the Christ'." (A. Whealey, *The Testimonium Flavianum in Syriac and Arabic*, "New Testament Studies," Volume 54, Issue 4, 2008, pp. 580–581).

⁷⁵ "Tacitus's report confirms what we know from other sources, that Jesus was executed by order of the Roman governor of Judea, Pontius Pilate, sometime during Tiberius's reign" (Bart D. Ehrman, *Lost Christianities. The Battles for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew*, New York 2005, p. 212).

laniatu canum interirent aut crucibus affixi [aut flammandi atque], ubi defecisset dies, in usum nocturni luminis urerentur. hortos suos ei spectaculo Nero obtulerat,⁷⁶

Nero, in order to stifle the rumour ascribed it to those people who were hated for their wicked practices, and called by the vulgar Christians: these he punished exquisitely. The author of this name was Christ, who in the reign of Tiberius was brought to punishment⁷⁷ by Pontius Pilate, the procurator. For the present this pernicious superstition was in part suppressed; but it brake out again, not only over Judea, whence this mischief first sprang, but in the city of Rome also, whither do run from every quarter and make a noise, all the flagrant and shameful enormities. At first, therefore, those were seized who confessed: afterward a vast multitude were detected by them, and were convicted, not so much as really guilty of setting the city on fire, but as hating all mankind; nay, they made a mock of them as they perished, and destroyed them by putting them into the skins of wild beasts, and setting dogs upon them to tear them to pieces: some were nailed to crosses, and others flamed to death: they were also used in the night-time instead of torches for illumination. Nero had offered his own gardens for this spectacle.⁷⁸

The passage is also significant because it was written about 80 years after the crucifixion of Jesus. There is no one among modern scholars who challenges the authenticity of the *Annals* and especially the section concerning Christians.⁷⁹

Lucian

Lucian of Samosata (Λουκιανὸς ὁ Σαμοσατεύς), the famous satirist (ca. 125–after 180 C.E.), brought us one of the earliest surviving pagan perceptions of Christianity and the clear allusion to the crucifixion of its founder. In a mocking account of the life and death of the Cynic philosopher Peregrinus, written ca. 165 C.E.,⁸⁰ he referred three times to Jesus:

11 Ὅτεπερ καὶ τὴν θαυμαστὴν σοφίαν τῶν Χριστιανῶν ἐξέμαθεν, περὶ τὴν Παλαιστίνην τοῖς ἱερεῦσιν καὶ γραμματεῦσιν αὐτῶν συγγενόμενος. καὶ τί γάρ; ἐν βραχεὶ παῖδας αὐτοὺς ἀπέφηνε, προφήτης καὶ θιασάρχης καὶ ξυναγωγεὺς καὶ πάντα μόνος αὐτὸς ὢν, καὶ τῶν βιβλίων τὰς μὲν ἐξηγεῖτο καὶ διεσάφει, πολλὰς δὲ αὐτὸς καὶ συνέγραφε, καὶ ὡς θεὸν αὐτὸν ἐκεῖνοι ἡδύντο καὶ νομοθέτη ἐχρῶντο καὶ προστάτην ἐπεγράφοντο, μετὰ γοῦν ἐκεῖνον ὄν

⁷⁶ P. Cornelii Taciti libri qui supersunt. Recognovit Carolus Halm. Editionem quintam curavit Georgius Andresen. Tomus prior qui libros ab excessu divi Augusti continet. Editio stereotypa, Lipsiae MCMXXX, pp. 347–348.

⁷⁷ Latin *supplicium* means in that circumstance “execution; death penalty” (J. C. Traupman, *The Bantam New College Latin & English Dictionary*. Revised and Enlarged, New York–Toronto–Sydney–Auckland 1995, p. 408), see also J. Klausner, op. cit. p. 75: “Christus, von dem sich ihr Name ableitet, wurde zur Zeit des Kaisers Tiberius durch den Prokurator Pontius Pilatus zum Tode verurteilt.”

⁷⁸ *The Works of Flavius Josephus*, op. cit., p. 735.

⁷⁹ J. Klausner, op. cit., pp. 75–76; R. E. Van Voorst, *Jesus Outside the New Testament. An Introduction to the Ancient Evidence*, Grand Rapids, Michigan – Cambridge, U.K. 2000, pp. 39–53; J. P. Meier, *Marginal Jew. Rethinking the Historical Jesus*. Vol. 1: *The Roots of the Problem and the Person*, New York–London–Toronto–Sydney–Auckland 1991, pp. 168–171.

⁸⁰ *Lucian*. With English Translation by A. M. Harmon. In Eight Volumes. V, London – Cambridge, Massachusetts MCMLXII, p. 2.

ἔτι σέβουσι, τὸν ἄνθρωπον τὸν ἐν τῇ Παλαιστίνῃ ἀνασκολοπισθέντα, ὅτι καινὴν ταύτην τελετὴν εἰσήγεν ἐς τὸν βίον.

It was then that he learned the wondrous lore of the Christians, by associating with their priests and scribes in Palestine. And – how else could it be? – in a trice he made them all look like children, for he was prophet, cult-leader, head of the synagogue, and everything, all by himself. He interpreted and explained some of their books and even composed many, and they revered him as a god, made use of him as a lawgiver, and set him down as a protector, next after that other, to be sure, whom they still worship, the man who was crucified in Palestine because he introduced this new cult into the world.⁸¹

13 Καὶ μὴν καὶ τῶν ἐν Ἀσίᾳ πόλεων ἔστιν ὧν ἤκόν τινες, τῶν Χριστιανῶν στελλόντων ἀπὸ τοῦ κοινοῦ, βοηθήσοντες καὶ συναγορεύσοντες καὶ παραμυθησόμενοι τὸν ἄνδρα. ἀμύχανον δέ τι τὸ τάχος ἐπιδείκνυνται, ἐπειδὴν τι τοιοῦτον γένηται δημόσιον· ἐν βραχεῖ γὰρ ἀφειδοῦσι πάντων. καὶ δὴ καὶ τῷ Περεγρίνῳ πολλὰ τότε ἤκεν χρήματα παρ' αὐτῶν ἐπὶ προφάσει τῶν δεσμῶν, καὶ πρόσδοτον οὐ μικρὰν ταύτην ἐποιήσατο. πεπείκασι γὰρ αὐτοὺς οἱ κακοδαίμονες τὸ μὲν ὅλον ἀθάνατοι ἔσεσθαι καὶ βιώσεσθαι τὸν αἰὲ χρόνον, παρ' ὃ καὶ καταφρονοῦσιν τοῦ θανάτου καὶ ἐκόντες αὐτοὺς ἐπιδιδόασιν οἱ πολλοί. ἔπειτα δὲ ὁ νομοθέτης ὁ πρῶτος ἔπεισεν αὐτοὺς ὡς ἀδελφοὶ πάντες εἶναι ἀλλήλων, ἐπειδὴν ἅπαξ παραβάντες θεοὺς μὲν τοὺς Ἑλληνικοὺς ἀπαρνήσονται, τὸν δὲ ἀνεσκολοπισμένον ἐκείνον σοφιστὴν αὐτὸν προσκυνῶσιν καὶ κατὰ τοὺς ἐκείνου νόμους βιώσιν. καταφρονοῦσιν οὖν ἀπάντων ἐξ ἴσης καὶ κοινὰ ἡγοῦνται, ἀνευ τινὸς ἀκριβοῦς πίστεως τὰ τοιαῦτα παραδεξάμενοι. ἦν τοίνυν παρέλθῃ τις εἰς αὐτοὺς γόης καὶ τεχνίτης ἄνθρωπος καὶ πράγμασιν χρῆσθαι δυνάμενος, αὐτίκα μάλα πλούσιος ἐν βραχεῖ ἐγένετο ἰδιώταις ἀνθρώποις ἐγγανών.

Indeed, people came even from the cities in Asia, sent by the Christians at their common expense, to succor and defend and encourage the hero. They show incredible speed whenever any such public action is taken; for in no time they lavish their all. So it was then in the case of Peregrinus; much money came to him from them by reason of his imprisonment, and he procured not a little revenue from it. The poor wretches have convinced themselves, first and foremost, that they are going to be immortal and live for all time, in consequence of which they despise death and even willingly give themselves into custody, most of them. Furthermore, their first lawgiver⁸² persuaded them that they are all brothers of one another after they have transgressed once, for all by denying the Greek gods and by worshipping that crucified sophist himself and living under his laws. Therefore, they despise all things indiscriminately and consider them common property, receiving such doctrines traditionally without any definite evidence. So if any charlatan and trickster, able to profit by occasions, comes among them, he quickly acquires sudden wealth by imposing upon simple folk.⁸³

Although not mentioned by name in these passages, there is no doubt that it is Jesus to whom Lucian is referring. Therefore, his literary testimony is accurate (even though disrespectful) and valuable because he also confirms the method and place of Jesus' execution.

⁸¹ *Lucian*, op. cit. pp. 12, 13.

⁸² [Footnote 1]: "From the wording of this sentence the allusion is so obviously to Christ himself that one is at a loss to understand why Paul, let alone Moses, should have been suggested. For the doctrine of brotherly love cf. Matt. 23, 8: πάντες δὲ ὑμεῖς ἀδελφοὶ ἐστε" (*Lucian*, op. cit., p. 15).

⁸³ *Lucian*, op. cit., pp. 14, 15.

One cannot regard the crucifixion of Jesus and his death as events which at that time would shock citizens of the Roman Empire. They were also of little interests to historians: just another execution performed in the relatively distant part of the Roman world. Therefore, one has to be surprised that so many early allusions to the crucifixion of Jesus and/or his death are to be found in the non-Christian sources. At least two of them are universally acknowledged as genuine.

Islamic denial of Jesus' death

The basic source of the Islamic denial of Jesus' crucifixion and death is the fragment of the fourth sura ("The Women") of the Qur'an (verses 157–158).⁸⁷ These verses come most probably from the Medinan period of the revelation of the Qur'an, i.e., three-five years after Muhammad's flight from Mecca in the year 622 C.E.⁸⁸ Still, one has to bear in mind that the collection of the Qur'anic text and its final edition (including the diacritical marks of the vowels crucial to the proper understanding of the Arabic words) could have taken up to two hundred years.⁸⁹

وَقَوْلِهِمْ إِنَّا قَتَلْنَا الْمَسِيحَ عِيسَى ابْنَ مَرْيَمَ رَسُولَ اللَّهِ وَمَا قَتَلُوهُ وَمَا صَلَبُوهُ وَلَكِنْ شُبِّهَ لَهُمْ وَإِنَّ الَّذِينَ اخْتَلَفُوا فِيهِ لَفِي شَكٍّ مِنْهُ مَا لَهُمْ بِهِ مِنْ عِلْمٍ إِلَّا أَنْبَاءُ الظُّلُمِ وَمَا قَتَلُوهُ يَقِينًا ﴿١٥٧﴾ بَلْ رَفَعَهُ اللَّهُ إِلَيْهِ وَكَانَ اللَّهُ عَزِيزًا حَكِيمًا ﴿١٥٨﴾
(سورة النساء)

wa-qawli-him 'in-nā qatalnā l-masīḥa 'Isā bna Maryama rasūla llāhi wa-mā qatalū-hu wa-mā ṣalabū-hu wa-lākin šubbiha la-hum wa-'inna l-laḡīna ḥtalaḡū fī-hi la-fī šakkin min-hu mā la-hum bi-hi min 'ilmin 'illā ttibā'a z-zanni wa-mā qatalū-hu yaqīnan (157) bal rafa'a-hu llāhu 'ilay-hi wa-kāna llāhu 'azīzan ḥakīmān (158)

157. That they said (in boast),⁹⁰

We killed Christ Jesus

The son of Mary,

The Messenger of Allah"; –

But they killed him not,

⁸⁷ القرآن الكريم، المطبعة المصرية ومكتبتها، القاهرة ١٣٨٩ هـ، ص ١٣٠.

⁸⁸ *Geschichte des Qorāns* von Theodor Nöldeke. Zweite Auflage bearbeitet von Friedrich Schwally. Erster Teil: Über den Ursprung des Qorāns, Leipzig 1909, pp. 195–196.

⁸⁹ J. Wansbrough, *The Sectarian Milieu. Content and Composition of Islamic Salvation History*, Oxford 1978, p. 119; P. Crone, *Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam*, Princeton 1987, pp. 203–230; J. Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies. Sources and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation*. Foreword, Translations, and Expanded Notes by A. Rippin, Amherst, New York 2004, pp. 44–52; compare *Geschichte des Qorāns* von Theodor Nöldeke. Zweite Auflage völlig umgearbeitet von F. Schwally. Zweiter Teil: *Die Sammlung des Qorāns, mit einem literarhistorischen Anhang über die muhammedanischen Quellen und die neuere christliche Forschung*, Leipzig 1919, pp. 27–119.

⁹⁰ The word in the brackets is taken from the commentary to the Qur'an; compare the most popular commentary of two imams, Al-Ġalīlī: Al-Maḥallī, and As-Suyūṭī:

القرآن الكريم بالرسم العثماني وبهامشه تفسير الإمامين الجليلين العلامة جلال الدين محمد بن أحمد المحلي والعلامة جلال الدين عبد الرحمن بن أبي بكر السيوطي (...), بيروت ١٤٠٢ هـ، ص ١٣٠.

Nor crucified him.
 Only a likeness of that
 Was shown to them.
 And those who differ
 Therein are full of doubts,
 With no (certain) knowledge.
 But only conjecture to follow,
 For of surety
 They killed him not: –

158. Nay, Allah raised him up
 Unto Himself; and Allah
 Is Exalted in Power, Wise; –⁹¹

Only these Qur'anic verses refer to the crucifixion of Jesus and his death. Paradoxically enough, the categorical denial of the idea of crucifixion or death attributed to Jesus by the New Testament points to the fact that the story of Jesus was rather well known in Jewish and in Christian milieu of the Arabic peninsula. The pagan society which begot the Prophet of Islam should have got acquainted with that story as well.

As a matter of fact, many biblical stories appear in the Qur'an, although in their adapted versions, because they were usually related to Muhammad and his contemporaries.⁹²

The Qur'an, however, is not to be treated as a historical source. The biblical stories had been adapted to reveal God's plan. Therefore, one should not be surprised that the crucifixion of Jesus and his death, the crucial facts for Christianity, were rejected by Islam: "The denial, furthermore, is in perfect agreement with the logic of the Qur'ān. The biblical stories reproduced in it (e.g., Job, Moses, Joseph etc.) and the episodes relating to the history of the beginning of Islam demonstrate that it is 'God's practice' (*sunnat Allāh*) to make faith triumph finally over the forces of evil and adversity. 'So truly with hardship comes ease' (XCIV, 5, 6). For Jesus to die on the cross would have meant the triumph of his executioners; but the Qur'ān asserts that they undoubtedly failed:

⁹¹ *The Holy Qur-ān. English translation of the meanings and Commentary*. Muṣḥaf Al-Madinah An-Nabawiyyah. Revised & Edited By The Presidency of Islamic Researches, Al-Madinah Al-Munawarah 1410 H [1989–1990], pp. 267–268.

⁹² The Christian polemicists point to historical errors in the Qur'an listing. According to them at least ten verses (plus their variants) are at variance with the biblical and historical facts: 2:249; 3:49; 5:110; 6:74; 12:49; 17:1; 19:23, 28, 29–30, 83–98; 20:85; 28:6; 66:12 (Villach, Austria [n.d.], تعليقات على القرآن، سلسلة الهداية. العدد الرابع [n.d.], pp. 80–82). Compare also P. Turek, *Odpowiadając islamowi – protestanci w dialogu i polemice z muzułmanami* [Answering Islam – Protestants in a dialogue and polemic with Muslims], "Orientalia Christiana Cracoviensia" 1 (2009), Kraków 2009, p. 39.

‘Assuredly God will defend those who believe’ (XXII, 49). He confounds the plots of the enemies of Christ (III, 54).⁹³

What are the sources of the Qur’anic story denying the crucifixion of Jesus and even more, his death? The Islamic exegetes focused on the internal explanation of the Qur’anic text providing us with the following hypotheses:

- the Jews crucified a person similar to the Christ⁹⁴ (so Aṭ-Ṭabarī);⁹⁵
- the Christ asked his disciples who would sacrifice themselves for him; one of the apostles accepted the mission and God made him resemble the Christ; finally that double? has been captured by the Jews and died on the cross (Aṭ-Ṭabarī);⁹⁶
- one of the Christ’s false followers was ready to betray him and at the very moment God made him resemble the Christ; the traitor has been crucified instead of the Christ (so Az-Zamaḥṣarī).⁹⁷

The contemporary Islamic commentators also try to refer to the external sources:

But some of the early Christian sects did not believe that Christ was killed on the Cross. The Basilidans believed that someone else was substituted for him. The Docetae held that Christ never had a real physical or natural body, but only an apparent or phantom body, and that his Crucifixion was only apparent, not real. The Marcionite Gospel (about A.D. 138) denied that Jesus was born, and merely said that he appeared in human form. The Gospel of St. Barnabas supported the theory of substitution on the Cross.⁹⁸

It is indeed likely that the Qur’anic idea of a seeming crucifixion and of a substitution for Christ on the cross originated in the Gnostic tradition represented by Marcion and Basilides, or in Docetism, which had much in common with that religion. Gnosticism, a rich and polymorphic religious movement, is often regarded as “pre-Christian oriental mysticism.”⁹⁹ Christian Gnosticism was an effort to separate Christianity from its past and mainly from its Judaic roots by blending with the surrounding environment. Yet, the Christian version of Gnosticism could be formed only after the historical event: the crucifixion of Jesus and his death. To develop this version of Gnosticism one had to be reliant on the already existing literary sources: the letters of Paul and the four Gospels.

Marcion, the second century religious reformer (he died ca. 160 C.E.), was in favour of the sharp Gnostic division between the evil creator – the Old Testament god (δημιουργός) and the good God-Saviour. He entirely rejected

⁹³ *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*. New Edition. Prepared by a Number of Leading Orientalists. Volume III: H-IRAM. Photomechanical Reprint, London 1986, p. 84.

⁹⁴ The Arabic word المسيح ’Al-Masīḥ “Christ, Messiah” is preceded by the definite article.

⁹⁵ الطبري، جامع البيان عن تأويل أي القرآن (تفسير الطبري)، القاهرة ١٤٢٢ هـ / ٢٠٠١ م، ٧: ٦٥٠.

⁹⁶ تفسير الطبري، ٧: ٦٥١.

⁹⁷ الزمخشري، الكشاف عن حقائق غوامض التنزيل وعيون الأقاويل في وجوه التأويل، الرياض ١٤١٨ هـ / ١٩٩٨ م، ١٧٥: ٢.

⁹⁸ An evident allusion to Judas, one of twelve.

⁹⁹ *The Holy Qur-ān*, op. cit., p. 268.

⁹⁹ *Encyclopedia of Religion*. Edited by V. Ferm, New York 1981, p. 300.

the Old Testament and attempted to purge Christianity from all Jewish traces. He assumed that out of all the Christian scriptures only ten letters of Paul and the Gospel of Luke were genuine, yet even from them he eliminated all the Judaic “additions.” His Jesus, the revealer of the true alien God, was sent by him to the evil world, took on a bodily form, described as τὸ φάντασμα (an appearance, a phantom) and died on the cross. Subsequently, he completed his work of salvation.¹⁰⁰

Basilides (taught 116–161 C.E.) was the first important representative of Christian Gnosticism. His Christ was an aeon (ὁ αἰὼν), an emanation of the supreme Father. In order to free humanity from the tyranny of the Jewish god and creator of the world, the supreme God sent his son, Christ-νοῦς (Mind) who

¹⁰⁰ K. Rudolph, *Die Gnosis. Wesen und Geschichte einer spätantiker Religion*. Mit zahlreichen Abbildungen und einer Faltkarte. 4. durchgesehene Auflage, Göttingen 2005, pp. 337–341; *Encyclopedia of Religion*, op. cit., p. 468; *A Lexicon Abridged from Liddell and Scott's Greek-English Lexicon*, Oxford 1953, p. 157. Compare Irenaeus *Against Heresies* I, 27, 2–3: “2. Marcion of Pontus succeeded him, and developed his doctrine. In so doing, he advanced the most daring blasphemy against Him who is proclaimed as God by the law and the prophets, declaring Him to be the author of evils, to take delight in war, to be infirm of purpose, and even to be contrary to Himself. But Jesus being derived from that father who is above the God that made the world, and coming into Judaea in the times of Pontius Pilate the governor, who was the procurator of Tiberius Caesar, was manifested in the form of a man to those who were in Judaea, abolishing the prophets and the law, and all the works of that God who made the world, whom also he calls Cosmocrator. Besides this, he mutilates the Gospel which is according to Luke, removing all that is written respecting the generation of the Lord, and setting aside a great deal of the teaching of the Lord, in which the Lord is recorded as most clearly confessing that the Maker of this universe is His Father. He likewise persuaded his disciples that he himself was more worthy of credit than are those apostles who have handed down the Gospel to us, furnishing them not with the Gospel, but merely a fragment of it. In like manner, too, he dismembered the Epistles of Paul, removing all that is said by the apostle respecting that God who made the world, to the effect that He is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, and also those passages from the prophetic writings which the apostle quotes, in order to teach us that they announced beforehand the coming of the Lord. 3. Salvation will be the attainment only of those souls which had learned his doctrine; while the body, as having been taken from the earth, is incapable of sharing in salvation. In addition to his blasphemy against God Himself, he advanced this also, truly speaking as with the mouth of the devil, and saying all things in direct opposition to the truth,— that Cain, and those like him, and the Sodomites, and the Egyptians, and others like them, and, in fine, all the nations who walked in all sorts of abomination, were saved by the Lord, on His descending into Hades, and on their running unto Him, and that they welcomed Him into their kingdom. But the serpent which was in Marcion declared that Abel, and Enoch, and Noah, and those other righteous men who sprang from the patriarch Abraham, with all the prophets, and those who were pleasing to God, did not partake in salvation. For since these men, he says, knew that their God was constantly tempting them, so now they suspected that He was tempting them, and did not run to Jesus, or believe His announcement: and for this reason he declared that their souls remained in Hades.” (*The Ante-Nicene Fathers. Translations of the Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325*. The Rev. A. Roberts, and J. Donaldson, Editors. Revised and Chronologically Arranged, with Brief Prefaces and Occasional Notes, by A. Cleveland Coxe. Volume I. New York 1913, p. 352).

appeared in Jesus but who, just before the crucifixion, exchanged his human body with Simon of Cyrene. Hence, Christ was not crucified but returned unrecognized to his Father.¹⁰¹

The second century Docetists declared that Christ did not agonize on the cross because he appeared only seemingly (Greek *δοκέω* to seem, appear) in a bodily form, being too divine to suffer death. The Gnostic thought had to transform the already existing Christian theology of the suffering and of the cross.¹⁰²

The already quoted Islamic comment to the sura 4: 157–158 obscures the history of the Christian doctrine and faith because there is no distinction between the first Christian documents referring to the historical fact of the crucifixion

¹⁰¹ K. Rudolph, *Die Gnosis*, op. cit., p. 333–336; *Encyclopedia of Religion*, op. cit., p. 59; *A Lexicon*, op. cit., pp. 23, 468. Compare Irenaeus *Against Heresies* I, 24, 3–4: “3. Basilides again, that he may appear to have discovered something more sublime and plausible, gives an immense development to his doctrines. He sets forth that Nous was first born of the unborn father, that from him, again, was born Logos, from Logos Phronesis, from Phronesis Sophia and Dynamis, and from Dynamis and Sophia the powers, and principalities, and angels, whom he also calls the first; and that by them the first heaven was made. Then other powers, being formed by emanation from these, created another heaven similar to the first; and in like manner, when others, again, had been formed by emanation from them, corresponding exactly to those above them, these, too, framed another third heaven; and then from this third, in downward order, there was a fourth succession of descendants; and so on, after the same fashion, they declare that more and more principalities and angels were formed, and three hundred and sixty-five heavens. Wherefore the year contains the same number of days in conformity with the number of the heavens. 4. Those angels who occupy the lowest heaven, that, namely, which is visible to us, formed all the things which are in the world, and made allotments among themselves of the earth and of those nations which are upon it. The chief of them is he who is thought to be the God of the Jews; and inasmuch as he desired to render the other nations subject to his own people, that is, the Jews, all the other princes resisted and opposed him. Wherefore all other nations were at enmity with his nation. But the father without birth and without name, perceiving that they would be destroyed, sent his own first-begotten Nous (he it is who is called Christ) to bestow deliverance on them that believe in him, from the power of those who made the world. He appeared, then, on earth as a man, to the nations of these powers, and wrought miracles. Wherefore he did not himself suffer death, but Simon, a certain man of Cyrene, being compelled, bore the cross in his stead; so that this latter being transfigured by him, that he might be thought to be Jesus, was crucified, through ignorance and error, while Jesus himself received the form of Simon, and, standing by, laughed at them. For since he was an incorporeal power, and the Nous (mind) of the unborn father, he transfigured himself as he pleased, and thus ascended to him who had sent him, deriding them, inasmuch as he could not be laid hold of, and was invisible to all. Those, then, who know these things have been freed from the principalities who formed the world; so that it is not incumbent on us to confess him who was crucified, but him who came in the form of a man, and was thought to be crucified, and was called Jesus, and was sent by the father, that by this dispensation he might destroy the works of the makers of the world. If any one, therefore, he declares, confesses the crucified, that man is still a slave, and under the power of those who formed our bodies; but he who denies him has been freed from these beings, and is acquainted with the dispensation of the unborn father.” (*The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Volume I, op. cit., p. 349).

¹⁰² K. Rudolph, *Die Gnosis*, op. cit., p. 172–173, 181; *Encyclopedia of Religion*, op. cit., p. 232; *A Lexicon*, op. cit., p. 177.

of Jesus and his death and the Gnostic works depending on earlier (at least by twenty-forty years) documents. The Gnostics used the already existing letters of Paul and the Gospels to corroborate the dogma of appearance, substitution on the cross, etc.¹⁰³

If we refer to the Qur'anic verses the historical details of Jesus' life and ministry cannot be recovered. It seems that the dissimilarity between the Jesus of universal history and the Christ of Islamic faith goes smoothly with the message of the Qur'an. Jesus has been placed in a long column of the prophets and for the Islamic commentators there is no reason to seek the historicity of that person outside of the Qur'anic text, let alone the coherence of the Christ's history.

For the non-sectarian researcher who is used to the hermeneutics based on the critical exegesis of the biblical text and its comparison with other non-biblical sources, the Jesus of history is the Jesus who lived in first century Palestine, who was a teacher and healer, had many followers, etc. etc., and who finally was condemned to death and died on the cross because of his teachings or his rather revolutionary deeds. The abundance of the sources leave scholars more or less convinced of his historicity; at least almost no one denies his existence, crucifixion and his death.

¹⁰³ Besides, the so-called *Gospel of Barnabas* should not appear even in this comment. Any person who in good faith quotes that text as an early Christian scripture lays himself/herself open to ridicule. That compilatory work was composed most probably in the period of the 14th till the 16th century. It was preserved in the form of two manuscripts, in Italian and Spanish. The contents of that peculiar book show that we have to do with an pro-Islamic compilation aimed at the justification of the Qur'an text and the Islamic dogmas or even with an antitrinitarian work composed so as to bridge the doctrinal gap between Christianity and Islam. (*The Gospel of Barnabas*. Edited and translated from the Italian Ms. In the Imperial Library at Vienna by L. and L. Ragg. With a Facsimile, Oxford 1907, pp. iii-lxxvii).